

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Psittacosis in Birds and People

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is psittacosis?

Psittacosis is a disease caused by bacteria (germs) that are found mainly in birds. Although the disease usually occurs in birds, people can also become ill with psittacosis.

Who can get psittacosis?

Anyone can develop the disease if they are exposed. People with the greatest risk are those who own or work with birds such as bird breeders, poultry processing workers, poultry farmers, veterinarians and their assistants, and pet shop employees. In the United States, psittacosis is rare, and fewer than 50 cases are reported each year.

How is psittacosis spread?

The germs must be breathed in to cause disease. This usually happens when someone breathes in dust that has dried bird droppings or dried secretions from infected birds in it. People may also get ill if they don't wash their hands well after touching the feathers of sick birds or if they touch their mouths to the birds' beaks. The germs do not spread easily from one person to another.

What are the symptoms in people?

The symptoms of psittacosis in people can be mild to quite severe. The most common symptoms are fever, chills, headache, fatigue and a dry cough. Many people who are infected develop pneumonia. Older people tend to develop more serious disease, especially if they are not treated. Symptoms can begin 5 to 21 days after infection, but typically begin within 7 to 14 days. Psittacosis can be treated with antibiotics.

How can you know for sure if you have psittacosis?

In people, the diagnosis of psittacosis is made by special blood tests. Since the tests take some time to be completed, healthcare providers will usually start people they think have psittacosis on antibiotic treatment before the test results are available. If you own or work with birds and you develop symptoms, tell your healthcare provider. This information can help your healthcare provider make the diagnosis of psittacosis.

Are there any restrictions for people with psittacosis?

No. People who have psittacosis can continue to do daily activities like school or work as long as they feel well enough to attend. The disease is unlikely to spread from one person to another.

What are the signs of psittacosis in birds?

The signs of psittacosis in birds vary greatly. The typical signs include decreased activity, poor appetite, ruffled feathers, runny eyes and nasal discharge. Some birds may also have difficulty breathing. Birds will often have diarrhea and may produce yellow or green droppings. Illness typically begins between three days to several weeks after infection. On rare occasions, birds may not become ill for up to a year after infection. Some birds can be infected, yet look perfectly healthy.

What types of birds are most likely to get psittacosis?

Over 100 different species of birds can get psittacosis. In the United States, psittacine birds (such as parrots, macaws, cockatiels and parakeets) are most commonly infected with the germs. Other birds, like turkeys and pigeons can also carry the germs, but chickens rarely do.

What if I think my bird has psittacosis?

If you think your bird has psittacosis, call your veterinarian right away. Your veterinarian can do tests to see if your bird has this disease. Psittacosis in birds can be treated with antibiotics. Your veterinarian can help you set up a treatment plan for your bird and any other birds you may have.

How can I prevent psittacosis?

- Avoid birds that are obviously sick. Signs of illness in birds may include runny eyes, runny noses, diarrhea and ruffled feathers.
- Take new birds to a veterinarian for a check-up as soon as possible after purchase.
- Keep new birds in a separate room from other birds for 30 to 45 days; have the new birds tested or treated for psittacosis before they are added to an existing group of birds.
- Clean all birdcages, food bowls and water bowls every day and disinfect them at least once a week.*
- Take sick birds to a veterinarian for treatment.

Where can you get more information?

- Your veterinarian
- Your health care provider
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>
- The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Animal Health, Biosecurity and Dairy Services at (617) 626-1795

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* To disinfect items, use a household bleach mixture (1 ½ cups of bleach in 1 gallon of water), Lysol®, or rubbing alcohol. Wash the item with a household detergent, rinse with water, soak in disinfectant for 5 minutes, and then rinse again. When cleaning birdcages, spray the floor of the birdcage with a disinfectant before cleaning to cut down on the dust. For new birds or cage changes, throw away wooden perches and other things cannot be disinfected.